



U.S. Coast Guard History Program

Mercury, 1807

New Bern, North Carolina
Master David Wallace

A god from Roman mythology who served as messenger to the other gods and was himself the god of commerce, travel, and thievery.

Builder: Ocracoke, NC

Rig:

Length:

Beam:

Draft:

Displacement:

Cost:

Commissioned: 1807

Disposition: Out of service by 1820

Complement:

Armament:

Cutter History:

Cutter: On April 6, 1807, the customs collector for North Carolina signed a contract to build *Mercury* at Ocracoke, North Carolina. On January 31, 1809, the Treasury Department moved the cutter's homeport from Ocracoke to New Bern. *Mercury* last appeared in the records in 1820 and little else is known about the cutter's size and rig.

Master: Not much is known about Master David Wallace, but he did live in New Bern while the cutter was stationed there. He was a member of the Wallace family of Portsmouth, North Carolina, which included another David Wallace, the collector of customs for that port.

War of 1812 Events and Operations:

June 18. President James Madison signs a declaration of war and the War of 1812 officially begins. The congressional authorization states “*that the President of the United States is hereby authorized to use the whole land and naval force of the United States . . . against the vessels, goods, and effects of the government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and the subjects thereof.*”

June 18. Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin sends a circular to all customs collectors, writing only the sentence: “*Sir, I hasten to inform you that War was this day declared against Great Britain*”. In a separate circular, Gallatin orders the news dispatched to U.S. naval vessels by revenue cutters stationed at Savannah; Norfolk; Charleston; New York; Portsmouth, New Hampshire; Wilmington, North Carolina; and Wilmington, Delaware.

December 28, 1812. In response to a letter from the Boston Customs Collector, Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin writes, “*A Revenue Cutter cannot be expressly fitted and employed for the purpose of cruising against an enemy except under the 98th Section of the collection law in which case the Cutter must be placed under the direction of the Secretary of the Navy.*”

May 21, 1813. British privateer *Venus of Bermuda* (formerly the American privateer *Highflyer* of Baltimore), attempts a surprise attack on cutter *Mercury* and American vessels anchored at Ocracoke. The plot was detected and an alarm raised in town before the British privateer could spring its trap, so the enemy raider departed to search for easier prey sailing offshore.

July 12, 1813. A British squadron launches a surprise attack against Ocracoke, North Carolina, including the cutter *Mercury* and two armed American privateers at anchor there. Fifteen armed barges, supporting approximately 1,000 British officers and enlisted men, overtake the American brigs, but the *Mercury* escapes by “*crowding upon her every inch of canvas she had, and by cutting away her long boat.*” The British had hoped to capture the cutter and sail into Pamlico Sound to take by surprise the city of New Bern, N.C.; however, *Mercury* sailed away with important customs house papers and bonds, arrived with the news at New Bern and thwarted a surprise attack by the British forces. New Bern, North Carolina’s *Carolina Federal Republican* wrote on July 31st “*Captain David Wallace of the Revenue Cutter, merits the highest praise for his vigilance address and good conduct in getting the Cutter away from the enemy, and bringing us the most speedy intelligence of our danger. To this fortunate event, we may fairly and truly ascribe the backwardness of the enemy to make his intended visit to Newbern, and his final abandonment of the design.*”

July 30, 1813. *Mercury* carries New Bern militia officers to Ocracoke to survey Beacon Island as a suitable site to erect fortifications.

September 15, 1813. Under a white flag, an officer from HMS *Pears* delivers to the deputy customs collector at Ocracoke, North Carolina, a notice “*declaring this port, together with Beaufort and all others of note to the southward of this, in a state of blockade; he also informs that all the ports of the United States, to the southward of Boston, are declared to be in the same predicament*” [Salem (Massachusetts) Gazette, October 5, 1813]

August 8, 1814. Peace negotiations between the United States and Great Britain begin in Ghent, Belgium.

November 5, 1814. The Pittsfield [Massachusetts] *Sun* reports a British brig captured and sent into Beaufort, North Carolina, by the local revenue cutter (likely *Mercury*).

November 12, 1814. *Mercury* captures the *Fox*, tender for HMS *Ramilles* (74). *Mercury*’s crew used the cutter’s boat to capture *Fox*, which went aground on Ocracoke Bar. *Mercury* took to New Bern, North Carolina, the captured vessel and the prisoners, including a Royal Navy midshipman and seven British seamen.

December 24, 1814. Peace treaty (Treaty of Ghent) signed between representatives of the United States and Great Britain at a ceremony in Ghent, Belgium.

January 4, 1815. In response to the destructive effects of the war on commerce, New England delegates to the Hartford Convention claim that “*Commerce, the vital spring of New England’s prosperity, was annihilated. Embargoes, restrictions, and rapacity of revenue officers, had completed its destruction.*”

January 8, 1815. Americans defeat a British army in the Battle of New Orleans in the last major land engagement of the war.

February 11, 1815. Under the white flag, HMS *Favorite* (18) delivers the peace treaty, Treaty of Ghent, to New York City.

February 16, 1815. President Madison signs Treaty of Ghent officially ending the War of 1812.

February 25, 1815. Treasury Secretary Alexander J. Dallas issues a circular to all customs collectors regarding future policy in light of the conclusion of the war. In the two-page circular, he instructs, “[cutter] *officers and men must be recommended for their vigilance, activity, skill and good conduct.*” Dallas later directs that “*Smuggling, in every form, must be prevented, or punished. And if it be not prevented, the officers of the customs, according to their respective duties and stations, will be held answerable to prove, that there was no want of vigilance on their part.*” In the final paragraph, Dallas lists other duties to be

carried out by the customs officials, hence their respective cutters, including *"immediate measures will be taken, for restoring the light-houses, piers, buoys, and beacons, within your district and jurisdiction, to the state in which they were before the war"*.

March 3, 1815. Congress repeals *"the acts prohibiting the entrance of foreign vessels into the waters of the United States"*, thereby repealing elements of the Non-Intercourse and Non-Importation acts.

May 30, 1815. Treasury Secretary Alexander Dallas writes the New York customs collector about building one or more schooner-rigged cutters to replace those lost in the war.

Sources:

Cutter History File, Coast Guard Historian's Office.

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